

WHO WILL GIVE UP THEIR DISTINCTIONS?

I began by asking a question and the question is what I am left with, still moving, still uncertain, vastly more complicated. A question to beget more questioning, as in, “What does it mean, this giving up of distinctions? Which distinctions? And, how to give them up?” The question was born of a gut feeling, knowing that I must question without knowing what else. I would like to have come to easy answers or simple replies, but what I am left with is, appropriately, a complicated mass that resists distillation.

What is your connection to your blood, your chromosomes, the soft matter of your flesh? My connection to my flesh is a matter of containment. I am held within a certain shape, but that shape is fundamentally distinct from my identity. My self is a composite summary of, at least, these considerations: familial intimates who do not always share a history of blood, shameful denial, small towns, big towns, champagne sky, a colourful cast of lovers, words and paper and paper and words, weight, lightness, darkness, dancing. I want to be considered nothing less than this minimal constellation of experiences and preferences. What I really want is to insist on the complexity of all this and then some. By asking who will give up their distinctions, I have at least this much to certainly say: I am not a check box.

I want to insist on our common humanity before I embrace my particularities. First, “who will give up their distinctions?” is a rallying cry to acknowledge the person, simply, prior to compartmentalizing their eccentricities or specificities. Second, “who will give up their distinctions?” is a call to arms to insist on the complexity of those distinctions, to insist that each and every one of them be accounted for in an accounting of an individual. An adequate definition of what it means to be human extends far beyond the boxes we could check if we chose to. Third, “who will give up their distinctions?” begs an accounting of privilege becoming, “who will give up their luxury to be on equal ground with every other human in the world?”¹ This question about distinctions is a beginning, coming along in the midst of our history, looking forward to a future and asking what we can become.

Responding to the simplistic question of who might be willing to give up their distinctions, Debashis Sinha offers a complication of the idea that distinctions can be either embraced or given up in his video work *skin* [2008]. Clint Enns, with his *Prepare to Qualify* [2008], suggests a turning-on-its-head of the whole ordeal, figuring a way to employ distinctions in the manufacture of fruitful, 21st century identities. In both cases easy understandings are challenged through the breakdown/degradation/manipulation of the images presented, leaving the viewer to ask, at the very least, “Whose skin is this?” and “Does what I am seeing qualify as art?” More important are the corollaries: How does your skin play into an understanding of another’s? What relation do abstract criteria hold to concrete things? How do we move beyond talk of our distinctions, to cultivating responses to the ideas our distinctions inevitably inform? How do we ensure respect and honour in moving from talk of distinctions to talk of ideas? How can we encourage recognition of our sameness before we begin the task of demarcation? Where am I in you?

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¹ From a conversation with Julianne Claire, 22 July 2008.